

Wittgenstein and the Kantian Critical Method

Marco Bastianelli

The ample bibliography on Wittgenstein offers the possibility to put the question of the existence of a relationship between him and Kant; now on the general level of methodological setting out, now on the more specific level of gnoseological contents. The purpose of this paper is to sketch an exam of some questions that arise on the general level of the method, dealing with contents only to the extent that they can be useful to make this clear. The aim is to try to answer the following question: is it still reasonable to speak of a critical-transcendental inquiry in relation to Wittgenstein?

About the supposed methodological proximity between the two philosophers, R. Haller admonishes to remember that

"One cannot simply call every non-dogmatic, non-sceptical attempt at grounding experience a "critical" one in the Kantian sense, because this would render the specifically Kantian point of departure quite empty" (1988, 52).

For this reason I intend to offer a preliminary scheme of the kantian position. The critical method is concerned with transcendental inquiry: the task of the critic of reason is to indicate the limits of a *a priori* knowledge. In other words, Kant's purpose is to individuate - in the human mind - the universal functions that are the conditions of our knowledge of reality; and, by means of these, to state its possibilities. The features of critical inquiry are:

a- to be an inquiry of reason on itself: namely it is self-referential;

b- to be completely a priori. Its aim is to reach universal and necessary conditions of possibility of knowledge;

c- to start with undiscussible facts. The standpoint that certifies the possibility of this inquiry is the firmness of sciences. Anyway, the inquiry proceeds on a different level than natural sciences, since it is concerned with their possibility;

d- to be complete, namely it should conduct to the individuation of all the conditions of knowledge. This character rests on the idea of a systematic reason;

e- to determinate the limits and the possibilities of knowledge, namely to prevent from using the *a priori* functions of mind beyond their limits, and to assure about the possibility of a certain and unquestionable knowledge.

Keeping in mind these items, which indicate also the way the inquiry proceeds, and examining Wittgenstein's position in the *Tractatus*, it is possible to point out that, in relation to a, while the object and the subject of kantian inquiry is the reason, in Wittgenstein it is replaced by language as expression of thought. This shift implies that it could be possible to speak of a wittgensteinian critical-transcendental inquiry, but in the sense of "linguistic transcendentalism", namely of an inquiry on the operating conditions of language. In this sense the conditions of our knowledge of reality are not the functions of thought, but the condition of its expression, i.e. the logical form. On a general level Pears agrees with this point:

"The simplest characterization of his [of Wittgenstein] philosophy is that is critical in the Kantian sense of that word. Kant offered a critique of thought and Wittgenstein offers a critique of the expressions of thought in language" (1997, vol. I, 3);

Nevertheless between the two inquiries there is a deep difference: the fact that the sentence is intended as representation of the world, and its condition is the not-sayable logical form, implies, as Wittgenstein writes in T.6.54, that the self-referentiality of his inquiry has a logical but not factual value. According to N. Garver this means that

"Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* was a failed attempt at reviving Critical Philosophy. It was such an attempt because its criterion of significance was drawn from the account of how sentences are possible, that is to say, from the description of what a sentence (*Satz*) is. It was a failed attempt because it was, by its own lights, nonsense" (1994, 42-43).

Garver's remark can be put in relation to *e*: the *Critique of pure Reason* circumscribes the field of the intellectual knowledge and introduces to practical reason; the closing silence of the *Tractatus*, on the contrary, discredits the very value of the inquiry and it doesn't prelude to anything. Anyway, considering the turning to linguistic inquiry, this silence shows the impossibility of speaking of the ultimate condition of language, the logical form. Consequently, it reveals that, when the operating of language is clear, no problems remain but only what escapes the notion of a problem. Similarly happens in the *Transcendental Dialectic* in which the limits of knowledge are stated from the inside, making it clear that the problems, since they necessarily arise from the operating of thought, mustn't be solved but eradicated as such. Thus, the silence of the *Tractatus* is not the empty silence of idle talks, but the typical one of sentences that show the totality and which, as such, are not properly meaningful. What they show is the sense of the world as a whole (its logical form and its value), against the unjustified strives of saying it beyond the limits of language. In this sense, such a silence testifies a critical attitude in the kantian sense of the *Transcendental Dialectic*.

But in the quoted passage Haller claims that to obtain the appellation of "critical philosopher" it's not enough to have such an attitude. It's possible to add that it's not sufficient to investigate the limits of language or thought to presume to act as a "transcendental philosopher". For this reason it's necessary to mention some more specific problems on a less general level.

With relation to points *b*, *c* and *d*, it could be said that also for Wittgenstein the inquiry on language moves from facts (the evidence, showed in *T.* 4.002 and *T.* 5.4733 that it exists an articulated common language). Furthermore, he conducts his inquiry completely *a priori* as well as Kant does: but, while for Kant the physical-mathematical sciences are only paradigms to run metaphysics on the way of science, for Wittgenstein logic is the omni-comprehensive dimension of reality and of our knowledge of it. Hence logic is not only functional to the method but is the total dimension of the inquiry. About the effects of such a role I'll speak later.

Despite of the omni-comprehensive role of logic, the *Tractatus*, as logic-philosophical inquiry, lays on a level that, like the kantian critique, is not the one of natural sciences. In this sense we can state that the position of the *Tractatus* is transversal in respect to natural sciences precisely in the same way of the *Critique of pure Reason*.

Moreover, in the case of Kant the presumption that reason is a comprehensive and structured faculty determines the possibility of a complete classification of its functions, while in Wittgenstein the logical *a priori* doesn't determine the real possibility of enumerating the forms of language.

In relation to the forms of language, a problem emerges that leads us to the individuation of another important difference: for Kant (see the *Transcendental Deduction*) the objectivity of experience is warranted by the unity of the knowing subject; in Wittgenstein the possibility of necessary and universal logical forms doesn't rest on the unity of the subject but on the internal proprieties of the objects, as it seems from the ontology of the *Tractatus*.

But objects, according to *T.* 4.1272, are not immediately the real objects of the experience but what should correspond to the simplest logical signs, after the logical-transcendental analysis. In this sense, the ontology of the *Tractatus* is not the description of an independent world, but the transcendental mirror of the starting logical presupposition. Furthermore, to consider the objects under this light, implies that logic is the necessary condition of possibility of our representation of the world. If we understand the kantian forms *a priori* not as the subjective forms that apply to the world in itself but as the expression of an isomorphism between world and mind, then they're the

necessary and not knowable conditions of any possible experience; and in this sense, they are analogous to the logical form of language in Wittgenstein.

This last passage leads us to claim a kinship between Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and Kant's *Critique* also on the specific level of gnoseological contents. What interests is, in any case, that under the respect of the method, remains the idea that the Wittgenstein's purpose is to clarify the operating of language and to look for its transcendental condition in the logic, in order to establish the possibilities of language and, accordingly, its limits. As for Kant the possibility of our knowledge of the reality rests on the necessity of some specific operations of mind, so for Wittgenstein it rests on the necessary logical form, showed by the tautologies through the transcendental analysis of language.

Of course many things change if we proceed to a general exam of the *Philosophical Investigations*. In relation to *b* and *d*, it's possible to notice that the intention to investigate the essence of language and to give a necessary and universal foundation of its operating disappears. Language loses its feature of being the *super partes* means to investigate the objectivity of any possible knowledge, to take the one of a "form of life". There's no more a world of objects supposed to be independent from ordinary language, and neither the consequential idea of an isomorphism. So it seems to be impossible to speak of a critical position.

But J. McDowell's opinion is quite different. He claims that

"[...] we can have a position that is critical (in the same roughly Kantian sense: it acknowledges that world and mind are constitutively made for one another), but which, by dropping the "in itself", precisely sheds any need to talk of such a contribution (thereby, one might claim, becoming exactly what a critical realism would need to be). [...] The right thought is not that there are two inseparable contributions to the constitution of the world, but that one cannot do anything at all with the idea of a contribution from an ineffable "in itself" beyond the limits of "ordinary knowledge"" (1998, 307).

In this sense, according to McDowell Wittgenstein can be named "critical" only in the *Investigations* and not properly in the *Tractatus*. Pears, while starting from a different idea of critical philosophy which intends to mark the subjective contribution to knowledge, seems to share this conclusion:

"it is a laborious achievement requiring a sustained contribution from our minds. The meanings of our words are kept constant not by Platonic universals but by the stability of our own practices" (1997, vol. I, 11-12).

But in this perspective the forms of language lose their feature of being necessary functions of knowledge and they gain a praxeological one (Haller, 1988). So, the

isomorphism between mind and world that we find in the *Tractatus* is replaced with a position that can be hardly considered *subjective* in the kantian sense. Finally, in relation to c it can be observed that logic is no more the privileged standpoint and the experience is only an interrelation of language games.

About the role of philosophy, it is notorious its therapeutic character. This outcome, even if it could seem to be near to the kantian position, is on the contrary quite different. To justify this last remark I must premise that in the *Critique of pure Reason* the positive role of *Transcendental Analytic* is so much fundamental as the negative one of the *Transcendental Dialectic*. Therefore, the difference with kantian position is produced by the accentuation of one of the two aspects. So, if one considers the *Dialectic* the core of the critical position, then it is possible to speak of the critical philosophy only as a non-dogmatic and non-metaphysical one. In this way one forgets that it is based on a faith in the unchangeable structures and powers of human reason, which justifies the role of the *Analytic*. So one could think that in the case of Wittgenstein it is sufficient to consider philosophy as therapy to be assured on the possibility of a parallel with Kant. J. Hartnack is one of those who interpret Kant this way. Thus, he pretends to translate some kantian statements in the language of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* by replacing the term "reason" with the term "language". But Hartnack is perfectly conscious that the traditional readings of Kant privilege the *Analytic*. In any case, he writes,

"even if Kant's work is interpreted this way it is still comparable to Wittgenstein's philosophy - not, however, to the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophische Untersuchungen* but to the Wittgenstein who is the author of *Tractatus*. [...] In the *Tractatus* [...] a sentence is the same as a thought. *Tractatus* is consequently an attempt to find the conditions and limits of our thought - or, which comes to the same, to find the conditions and limits of knowledge" (1969, 134).

And this leads us back to the previous considerations.

To conclude: the parallel between Kant and Wittgenstein seems to hold good only if one considers the twofold role of the analytic of possibilities and of the dialectic of limits, hence only in the case of the *Tractatus*. On the contrary, it is misleading in the case of the *Philosophical Investigations*, because in them the therapeutic aspect of the method overcomes completely the idea that the critical inquiry concerns the universal forms of reason (or their expression, as in the *Tractatus*).

Nevertheless, another perspective is possible: if one considers kantian concepts *a priori* as rules for the experience, then the kantian transcendental could be found also in the *Philosophical Investigations*. So it could be possible to retrieve in this work both the

constructive-analytical and therapeutic-dialectical aspects of kantism. Most of the recent bibliography is focused on this theme. But for the moment I must only mention these recent perspectives with the intention of deepening my knowledge of them in a near future.

References

- Garver, N. (1994), "Naturalism and Transcendentalism: the Case of 'Forms of Life'", in *Wittgenstein and the contemporary Philosophy*, Gateshead 1994, 41-69.
- Hacker, P.M.S. (1997), *Insight and Illusion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Haller, R. (1988), "Was Wittgenstein a Neo-Kantian?", in *Questions on Wittgenstein*, London: Routledge, 44-56.
- Hartnack, J. (1969), "Kant and Wittgenstein", *Kantstudien* 60: 131-134.
- McDowell, J. (1988), *Mind, Value and Reality*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Pears, D.F. (1987), *The false Prison*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.